
Tracing the Contexts of Imprisonment: Perspectives on Incarceration between the Human and Social Sciences. An Introduction

Elisa Scaraggi, Daniel Lourenço, Susana Araújo and Cristina Martínez
Tejero



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rccs/9698>

DOI: 10.4000/rccs.9698

ISSN: 2182-7435

Publisher

Centro de Estudos Sociais da Universidade de Coimbra

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2019

Number of pages: 107-116

ISSN: 0254-1106

Electronic reference

Elisa Scaraggi, Daniel Lourenço, Susana Araújo and Cristina Martínez Tejero, « Tracing the Contexts of Imprisonment: Perspectives on Incarceration between the Human and Social Sciences. An Introduction », *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* [Online], 120 | 2019, Online since 12 December 2019, connection on 25 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rccs/9698> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/rccs.9698>



ELISA SCARAGGI, DANIEL LOURENÇO, SUSANA ARAÚJO,
CRISTINA MARTÍNEZ TEJERO

Tracing the Contexts of Imprisonment: Perspectives on Incarceration between the Human and Social Sciences. An Introduction

Western academia has shown an increased interest in the question of incarceration throughout the late 20th century and the early 21st century. Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir* (1975) sparked renewed discussions of carceral institutions as key to the political architecture of western modernity and as phenomena which demand critical and theoretical attention in genealogical as well as in structural and infra-structural terms. Since the book's publication, many scholars across different areas of inquiry have engaged in historical, sociological, political and cultural analysis of the carceral. Emerging from what was the burgeoning field of cultural studies, during the seventies Stuart Hall's co-authored book, *Policing the Crisis* (1978), with its focus on the political manipulation of anxieties regarding small crime in Britain and its denunciation of the highly mediatized hegemonic constructs which underpinned the criminalization of working-class racialized subjects, was a pioneering work which opened new paths to those studying security and punitive systems. Gilles Deleuze's short essay on control societies (1992)¹ proved to be an important theoretical reference for anyone working on security and punitive systems: a historical successor to the disciplinary societies presented by Foucault, the logic of control drafted by Deleuze has been highly suggestive as a means of articulating a range of shifts in the organization of power, conveying the new mechanisms of control as a broader, highly diffuse and technologically supported system of security and surveillance upheld by corporate interests.

¹ This essay was first published in *L'autre journal* in 1990 and was re-published in *Pourparlers* in the same year. It was later translated into English as "Postscript on the Societies of Control" and published in the journal *October* in 1992.

More recently, Jacques Derrida's "Death Penalty" seminars, conducted from 1999 to 2001, sought to deconstruct the theologico-political logic of the death penalty and offered an important contribution to the revision of the social, moral and political assumptions of punitive systems (Derrida, 2013, 2016). Derrida's work established a stimulating dialogue with other post-structuralist theorists such as Judith Butler (2004), whose work became concerned with notions of "indefinite detention" after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. From a different strand of French theory, closer to a Bourdieusian approach, authors such as Loïc Wacquant (1999, 2009) traced the circulation of slogans, theories, and measures of punitive technique fueled by Reaganomics in the United States and exported worldwide as part of a global "consensus" on economic deregulation.

More importantly, it was through the articulation between activism and academic work, and by drawing directly from counter-cultural and social movements of the 1960s and the 1970s in the United States, that some of the most powerful contributions to the field of prison studies emerged. We must not underestimate how much most of the above authors – and critical prison studies in general – owe to author and activist Angela Davis. Davis' work, firmly founded upon radical acts of political resistance, such as her affiliation with both the Black Panther Party and the Communist Party, as well as her involvement in the women's movement, offered and continues to offer a poignant critique of the prison industrial complex (Davis, 2003, 2005; Davis and Shaylor, 2001). Critical prison studies have further been reinforced by many valuable recent contributions such as those of Dylan Rodríguez (2006) and Khalil Muhammad (2010) and, more forcefully, by the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007a, 2007b), another major figure in contemporary carceral geography and a key public spokesperson for prison abolition.

Prison abolitionists, such as Davis and Gilmore, not only imagine a world without prison, but they labor towards social change, including access to jobs, housing, education, and healthcare so as to transform their communities and society at large, thus rendering prison obsolete. Drawing from the experiences of abolitionists and other activists, we – in our double role as witnesses and writers – must revise and reattune our awareness of how carceral institutions and practices have actively contributed to the oppression and exclusion of people not conforming to the social, economic and political norm, including the poor, non-white people, LGBTQ subjects, and political dissidents of various kinds. The establishment of detention as the primary form of punishment has, in fact, been essential to nurture the interests of dominant social groups and to determine their success,

including economically. This is patent in the economic interests which characterize contemporary carceral institutions, as they tend towards privatization. Recent works, such as Jackie Wang's *Carceral Capitalism* (2018), go so far as to question the precise definitional limits between prison and general society, contending that carcerality is something engrained in the very economic and lived fabric of contemporary society. The need to multiply multifocal and multifaceted forms of critical perspectivation on the question of the carceral ultimately informs initiatives such as our own.

The dossier presented in this issue of *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* approaches contexts of imprisonment with a keen sense of the generative possibilities of interdisciplinary conversations between the Human and the Social Sciences, something which energizes ensuing questions and objects of inquiry. The analytical and discursive frameworks across this dossier range from the sociological or the ethnographic to the speculative and philosophical, even the literary. Our contention is that it is the very material and temporal intricacy of this nexus of interdisciplinary encounters which endows this dossier with its critical cogency and political identity.

This is not to disavow delimitations between the Human and the Social Sciences as distinct, autonomous fields of critical inquiry and knowledge-production, as much as to key into how intervals between the two surprise many of the reified tenets of either as broad epistemic formations, thus precipitating other modes of attention, other kinds of intervention and other forms of critical narrative. The disciplinary differences and eventual discrepancies between the Human and the Social Sciences make up precisely that differential which enables their less likely cross-sections to become potent opportunities to grasp at that which might exceed either's epistemic reach according to their respective sense of totality. We hold that such opportunities are fundamental for an integrated understanding of the phenomenon of incarceration – on an international scale – as systemic, yet heterogenous. This implies tracing alternate critical pathways and disrupting congealed, crystallized disciplinary formations, as sets of internal as well as of external relations. Recontextualizing the convergences and divergences between multiple standpoints and methods allows us to raise the question of imprisonment differently.

Ours is an implicated, imbricated approach. We are a group of Humanities scholars, in the professional as much as in the scientific sense of the word, whose pathways have crossed through Project CILM – City and Insecurity in Literature and Media, a project funded from 2010 to 2013² by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT, in the Portuguese acronym)

² The project was supported under grant PTDC/CLE-LLI/110694/2009(CILM1).

which has, since then, developed three new lines of research under the pluriannual funding of the Centre of Comparative Studies at the University of Lisbon. CILM is concerned with figured and actual urbanscapes in the contemporary post-9/11, neoliberal societal paradigm and subtending cultural narratives of terror, insecurity, fear and precariousness across diverse regimes of representation. As part of CILM, this dossier is specifically located within a research line entitled “Prison States and Narratives of Captivity” which explores the material and discursive construction of prisons and other carceral spaces and examines the historical, economic and psychological contexts which shape the social and legal status of imprisoned subjects. Within this approach, questions about representation are necessarily questions about subjectivity, sociality and hegemony as well. We depart from the necessary politicization of cultural, literary and artistic studies to ascertain how both our objects of study and our very own epistemic precepts are engrained in wider architectures of power. It follows that our work is, by necessity, interdisciplinary, multidimensional and multifocal: it is as bound to texts as it is to contexts, and it is as motivated by the problematic of the word as it is by the world as a problem.

In September 2017, we organized the international conference “Prison States and Political Embodiment” at the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon. Our aim was to question the political structures and infra-structures of carceral institutions and to stimulate a fruitful conversation on subjection, embodiment and affectivity within contemporary prison contexts. In doing so, we were concerned with the necessary work of institutional critique as well as with rapports pertaining to the experiences, the emotions, the relations, the impressions and ultimately the very narratives of incarcerated subjects themselves. We mobilized the concept of political embodiment precisely to emphasize that corporeality is always already political, attentive to how the subject’s making (and unmaking) as the effect of systemics of power, governance and sovereignty remains an urgent question. *Moreover, as the legal scholar* Muneer Ahmad suggests, the body is also the ultimate stage on which the spectacle of dehumanization can be performed. Evoking Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “bare life” and Achille Mbembe’s necropolitics to comment on the lack of rights and conditions experienced by the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp, Ahmad states: “The site for confrontation between the individual and the state is the body, for once the mediating force of rights is removed, only the body remains” (2009: 1759).

The dossier that we present here follows through from the initiative of the international conference, while taking a material form and internal logic of its own. By calling attention to the inscription of the apparatus of power

in senses, sensations and significations articulated by subjects confined to the carceral context, we breach the problem of imprisonment as a mode of social life – or truthfully: as a mode of social death – which demands situated, mediated forms of critical narrative. How prisoners account for, voice, conceptualize and resist their objectification and erasure within imprisonment through distinctive strategies of subjectivation and survival, and particularly how they do so in mediation with specific conditions of material deprivation, destitution, isolation and quotidian aggression, is the question at the core of the present dossier. Independently of reformist or rehabilitative orientations, incarceration is, in and of itself, an act of political violence, as regulated and normalized by the state's monopoly on the distribution of violence. What, then, do incarcerated subjects – be it individually, or collectively – make of this violence? How do they articulate the experience of confinement, and how do they articulate themselves, in the widest sense of the word – expressively, corporeally, psychically and relationally – in such conditions of social death? This requires thinking through questions of place, perspective, and position. And even interrogating what our own specific responsibilities as academics towards the incarcerated are and may come to be, as we examine and critique prison systems in their heterogeneity. Contributions collected in this dossier, across diverse theoretical, textual, contextual and cultural positions, engage in this necessary undertaking, while dramatizing the heuristic and hermeneutic tensions at stake.

In the opening essay, “Incarceration as Violence: Inflicting Pain in Portuguese Prisons”, Catarina Frois and Afonso Bento confront the very definition of “prison violence” and emphasize the need to conceptualize it as a multidimensional and multifaceted phenomenon, both context-specific and integrated into a continuum which cannot be conscribed to the limits of carceral space and time. Addressing the structural contradictions unique to the Portuguese prison system, as well those belonging to the political discourse governing it, Frois and Bento emphasize how the national prison system's orientation towards reintegration was legally crystallized as an “abstract ideal” with the Carnation Revolution of 1974. Such an abstract ideal remains an organizing principle in the carceral context, just as the opposition between the deprivation of freedom and the deprivation of dignity persists as a polarity, which describes – or determines – the legitimacy of institutional violence. Yet their analysis demonstrates the contradictions governing carceral sociality, as shifting institutional dynamics implement incremental forms of partition, division, separation and demarcation. The discretionary and discriminatory distribution of violence within intra-institutional economies of judgement and punishment results in a strained field of relations.

Ultimately, a second-order system of moral authority, diffuse as it is, confounds the institution's stated intentionality. If the onus of imprisonment is presumed to be the subjective sensation of punishment – that is to say, if suffering one's way through incarceration is defined as that which endows it with its deterrent capacity, understood as pre-condition for reintegration into society at large – then here, the plurality of incongruous versions of what this entails results in the fragmentation of incarcerated subjects' experiences and the manipulation of their expectations.

In turn, in “Undoing the ‘Cemetery of the Living’: Performing Change, Embodying Resistance through Prison Theater in Nicaragua”, Julianne Weegels presents us with a discussion of the notionally rehabilitative and recuperative disposition of Nicaragua's governmental policy of *reeducción penal* (penal reeducation, in English): a system of recompense which pressures prisoners towards a *cambio de actitud* (i.e., a change of attitude), based on the rejection of criminal activities and on conformation to specific psychological, societal and behavioral exigencies. A necessary, normalized “socio-morally acceptable script”, in the author's words. Participating in diverse forms of occupational training under the rubric of *reeducción*, prisoners are attracted by the advantages of good conduct time (sentence reduction according to what is commonly described as “good behavior”), as much as by the opportunity to diversify their experience of the quotidian in confinement. This “progressive privilege system” creates its own specific emotional dynamics, altering inmates' perceptions of prison-time and shaping their affective relations to the fact of confinement and to the conjectural possibility of early release. Weegels centers her characterization of these structures and regulations, as well as of the first-person accounts produced by “prison-participants” around her long-term ethnographic fieldwork with a prison theater project articulated by her husband. Through direct and privileged access to contexts and conversations outside the realm of the publicly avowable, which actively entailed sustaining a fiction of compliance with Sandinista authorities so as not to lose institutional grounding, Weegels points to how prison theater reiterates and reifies systemic authority and administrative control while nonetheless affording conditions for expression, communication, critique, and change. In the process, she bears witness to inmate's subjective rapports and the specific vocabularies they conjure to describe their experiences. Distinctively, when prisoners perform before outsiders (i.e., not before other inmates, prison wardens or prison staff), a wider social and relational horizon is conjured, shifting their sense of the practice's very value and of their own conditions of articulation beyond the scope of confined social death.

In “Writing Resistance, Writing the Self: Literary Reconstruction in United States Prison Witness”, Doran Larson, the principal investigator of the American Prison Writing Archive (APWA), traces that archival project’s material history and argues for its profoundly transformative potential for studies of mass incarceration in the United States today. As an online, not-for-profit database of prisoners’ written testimonies, this digital platform allows for public access to first-person accounts of imprisonment as offered by the inmates themselves. And this, Larson contends, with minimal editorial input and none of the publishing market’s economically-based requirements. Acknowledging the tradition of black radical thought in the United States and its opposition to the prison industrial complex, Larson first points to published works authored by former prisoners, such as Malcom X, Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson. At stake in these autobiographical projects is the mediation – both literary and lived – of self-identity, through processes of recuperation and restoration which are construed as approximations to “collective sociality”. These processes likewise shape the texts amassed in the APWA as documents of contemporary mass incarceration, yet in quite different terms: they are not bound up with habitual critical grammars (such as those of intellectual literacy or political affiliation), they are not motivated by the feasibility of literary publication, and finally, they do not ensue from release as the pre-condition for crafting and sharing life narrative. These texts attest to the thought of social death in strikingly intimate ways, as they do to the ultimate possibility of the social as that which defines life, and its value. Distinguishing between “writers” and “witnesses”, to better discern and describe the specificities of the latter discursive corpus, Larson’s ultimate challenge is that academics themselves, as ethically implicated mediators of knowledge, bear witness to prison testimony – and that such imparts specific demands on their own praxis. This is vivid in his own compositional decision to feature as much source material as possible, while minimizing commentary: what the author himself describes as indexing.

Finally, Zakaria Rhani’s contribution, “The Inmate’s Two Bodies: Survival and Metamorphosis in a Moroccan Secret Prison”, concentrates on an individual’s experience of incarceration and provides an in-depth engagement with a singular counter-formation to the material and psychic pressures of prison violence at its very limits. Rhani writes of a survivor from the political prison of Tazmamart, which was a key apparatus of political censorship under the repressive rule of King Hassan the II during Morocco’s so-called “Years of Lead” (1960s-1980s). Drawing from personal, ongoing and open-ended conversations with “Kawni” (a deliberately selected alias which stands as a concept of its own), the author posits that the latter’s

experience is expressive of a process of transformative de-subjection which proved to be conditional for his survival, rather than the very proof of his nihilation. Rhani implicates himself in a distinct filament of European literature and philosophy (threading a line through Kafka, Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari) to think through the possibility of corporeal transformation and of subjective transmutation as key to resisting social and psychic death. Or even as key to *vivification*, to revisit Erving Goffman's important concept of mortification (1961). However, this movement towards "collective enunciation" which binds together various voices and signatures, including "Kawni" and Rhani's own, is not congealed around the Western canon. Rhani attends to the impact of Sufist asceticism, Muslim cosmology, or Buddhist ethics in Kawni's sense of self-relation, and of relation towards others. How Kawni's lived, felt and imagined horizons surpass – or trespass – the structures of confinement towards nature, world and alterity brings up difficult and urgent questions about the phenomenology of incarceration, about regulated and regulative versions of "freedom" and "dignity" and, in fact, about personal truth in the most intimate sense. By probing into challenging onto-epistemic terrains, weaving a multidimensional rapport, Rhani questions the idioms of critical narrativity and gestures towards lines of flight which exceed dominant cartographies of knowledge.

The idiosyncratic arch construed from the first to the last of these texts is important, as is the way they are collectively presented and organized together. One of our concerns when selecting the articles for this dossier was to offer a range of case-studies that conveyed carceral practices in different national contexts. By including examples from so-called peripheral Europe (Portugal), Central America (Nicaragua), North Africa (Morocco) and from North America (the United States), we also aim to invite comparative readings of carceral experiences in countries shaped by different political realities as well as specific colonial legacies. This will allow readers to consider the extent to which the far-reaching claws of the prison industrial complex intersect with global economy without obliterating the national, regional and local realities that may invite or challenge such transnational tendencies.

Overall, the conjugation and juxtaposition of divergent, even disparate perspectives on incarceration attests to the heterogeneity of carceral institutions and to that of the carceral as analytic. These authors are working at distinctive cultural and disciplinary crossroads, and according to different ethos, methods, theories and objectives. If theirs are often combinatory approaches adapted to specific instances, the combinatory logic on which this dossier itself is predicated attests to the extant diversification of efforts to retrace portraits of incarceration as well as to rewrite conceptions of how to do so.

In many ways, the critical processes of witnessing, documenting, remembering, and registering are vividly patent in the interventions collected – just as they are deliberately accentuated by our own editorial framework and the textual form this dossier subsequently assumes. As we present this dossier to readers, we propose that such processes are necessary in the project of constructing a multidimensional, palimpsestic archive of incarceration which challenges the foreclosure of incarcerated subjects' own truths as other to the study of the prison as institution. Academic and critical literature on incarceration and resistance makes up a textual corpus of its own, with its own genealogies and its own potentialities, which must be acknowledged in its own materiality and its own implication in systemics of power – and of possibilities for change.

Edited by Scott M. Culp

References

- Ahmad, Muneer I. (2009), "Resisting Guantánamo: Rights at the Brink of Dehumanization", *Northwestern University Law Review*, 103, 1683-1763.
- Butler, Judith (2004), *Precarious Lives: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Davis, Angela Y. (2003), *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Davis, Angela Y. (2005), *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Davis, Angela Y.; Shaylor, Cassandra (2001), "Race, Gender, and the Prison Industrial Complex: California and Beyond", *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 2(1), 1-25.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1992), "Postscript on the Societies of Control", *October*, 59, 3-7.
- Derrida, Jacques (2013), *The Death Penalty. Vol. I – The Seminars of Jacques Derrida*. Edited by Geoff Bennington, Marc Crépon, Thomas Dutoit. Chicago: University of Chicago. Translated by Peggy Kamuf.
- Derrida, Jacques (2016), *The Death Penalty. Vol. II – The Seminars of Jacques Derrida*. Edited by Geoff Bennington, Marc Crépon, Thomas Dutoit. Chicago: University of Chicago. Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg.
- Foucault, Michel (1975), *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson (2007a), *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson (2007b), "In the Shadows of the Shadow State", in INCITE! (ed.), *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 41-52.
- Goffman, Erving (1961), *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Anchor Books.

- Hall, Stuart; Critcher, Charles; Jefferson, Tony; Clarke, John; Roberts, Brian (1978), *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. London: Macmillan.
- Muhammad, Khalil Gibran (2010), *The Condemnation of Blackness*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Rodríguez, Dylan (2006), *Forced Passages*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wacquant, Loïc (1999), *Les prisons de la misère*. Paris: Raisons d’agir.
- Wacquant, Loïc (2009), *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
- Wang, Jackie (2018), *Carceral Capitalism*. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e).

Elisa Scaraggi

Centro de Estudos Comparatistas (CEC), Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa (FLUL) |
Projecto CILM – City and Insecurity in Literature and Media, CEC-FLUL
Alameda da Universidade, 1600-214 Lisboa, Portugal
Contact: elisascaraggi@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1411-8929>

Daniel Lourenço

Centro de Estudos Comparatistas (CEC), Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa (FLUL) |
Projecto CILM – City and Insecurity in Literature and Media, CEC-FLUL
Alameda da Universidade, 1600-214 Lisboa, Portugal
Contact: d.h.lour@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3359-0820>

Susana Araújo

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra (FLUC) | Centro de Estudos Comparatistas (CEC),
Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa (FLUL) | Projecto CILM – City and Insecurity in
Literature and Media, CEC-FLUL
FLUC, Largo da Porta Férrea, 3000-530 Coimbra, Portugal
Contact: s.i.a.araujo@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9046-2211>

Cristina Martínez Tejero

Universidade da Corunha | Centro de Estudos Comparatistas (CEC), Faculdade de Letras da
Universidade de Lisboa (FLUL) | Projecto CILM – City and Insecurity in Literature and Media,
CEC-FLUL
Campus da Zapateira, Faculdade de Filologia, Galiza, Espanha
Contact: cristina.martinez@udc.gal
ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8651-4990>
